

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost – Epistle

PROVOKED

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Hebrews 10:11-25

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,”13 and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, 16 “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,”17 he also adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” 18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. 19 Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh),21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,22 let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.23 Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,25 not neglecting to

meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

DIAGNOSIS: Never-Ending Offerings

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Provoked into Panic*

“I can’t make it to Bible study today.” “I don’t have time for church.” “There’s no time to spend with my spouse, never mind the kids.” We are running around like chickens with our heads cut off, and running on empty as well. The pace increases, and the peace decreases, even as we are convinced that each next bit of busy-ness will finally earn us rest, relief, and reward. Sounds like a secularized version of v. 11 (“offering again and again”), doesn’t it? True, we don’t sacrifice animals. But we do offer our sacrifices of time, money, and energy, for our jobs, for our cars, for our Café Mochas, for our looks, for whatever it is we try to use to soothe our souls and justify our existence. But of course these sacrifices don’t deliver. And so, like the priests of old, we are up at it the next day, again and again, faster and faster, until we hit overload or burnout.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Unsettled in Sin*

But you see, no sacrifice (whether it be an animal, grain, 15 hours of unpaid overtime, a bit of our integrity down the tubes to get the big contract, or a vacation at the lake for the sake of the kids’ college fund) can take away sin. And sin is what leaves us unsettled, unsure, needing something to give us peace of mind and security. Worse, sin is what blinds us to the reality that all these vain pursuits are just a distraction away from the One who is good and gracious, who gives the perfection that our credit cards and gym memberships never can. What we think is the cure really just feeds the disease.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Enemies Unforgiven*

And of course, the bind gets even deeper. When we seek our justification apart from God revealed in the crucified Christ, we set ourselves against God's loving purpose. And Hebrews warns us that Jesus does have enemies, whose racing about will eventually come to an un-peaceful end (v. 13). When we are apart from Christ, not only do we have the unhealed wound of sin to provoke us, but we have provoked God's wrath upon ourselves.

PROGNOSIS: Offer Never-Ending

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal solution) – *Offerings Over*

But Christ crucified and resurrected puts an end to sacrifices. Even while humanity wallowed in our attempts to make ourselves perfect, Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice. His blood is forgiveness of sins. His death spares us from wrath in an act of mercy that is both once-for-all (Jesus died but once), and never-ending (his mercy continues until the last Day).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Sacrifices Settled*

With Jesus' death, our sins are forgiven. "And where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin." When we hear the Word of mercy, we are freed to stop our manic efforts to dull the pain in our souls. Jesus offers real healing, and in that light, the world's paltry alternatives lose their hold on our hearts.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *"Provoked," in Peace*

We will still be provoked, thanks be to God. But this time, the provocation will come from the Holy Spirit at work in the Christian community. Our eternal account has been settled, our debts covered, our sins forgiven. Now, God will provoke us (acting, curiously enough, through other members of the Church) not into a rat race of manic action, but instead into the kind

of love and genuine good works that flow out of a right relationship with (faith in) the saving Triune God. Since the old Adam and Eve cling tenaciously, we need each other's close consideration, provocation, and encouragement. Lutherans might call this the mutual consolation and conversation of the believers. It is one way in which the Word puts an end to our self-generated works of sacrifice and sets our faith securely on the one righteous High Priest, Jesus the Son of God. And that faith will provoke us to love and service, so that the world might know the peace we have been given, and all the more urgent calling as we see the Day approaching.